

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

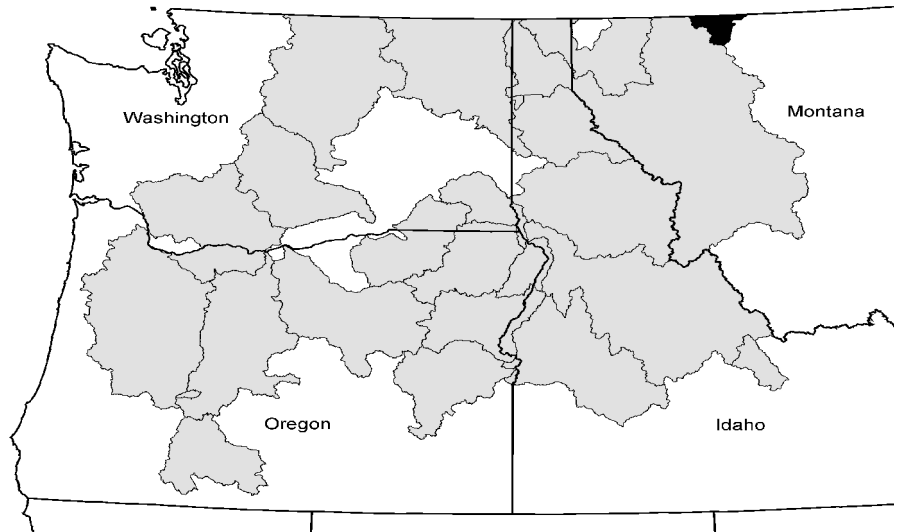
# Bull Trout Draft Recovery Plan and proposed Critical Habitat

## St. Mary/Belly River Recovery Unit (CHAPTER 25)

**What areas are included in the St. Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit?** The Saint Mary and Belly Rivers are tributaries of the South Saskatchewan River drainage in Canada, which eventually enters Hudson Bay. The Saint Mary and Belly Rivers flow northward from U.S. headwaters that include the northeastern portion of Glacier National Park and the northwestern portion of the Blackfeet Indian Nation, in northwest Montana. The Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is unique, as the only bull trout recovery unit east of the continental divide. It is a small recovery unit, encompassing only about 600 square miles in the U.S.

The recovery unit includes two separate primary core areas found in the interconnected portions of the Saint Mary River and Belly River watersheds, respectively. Four secondary core area populations are located in the Saint Mary River drainage in isolated headwaters of Red Eagle Lake, Slide Lake, Cracker Lake, and Lee Creek. Secondary core areas are based in smaller watersheds and

authorize within the range of bull



contain migratory populations of bull trout that have become isolated, with restricted upstream spawning and rearing habitat.

### **How much of the area is proposed as critical habitat?**

At this time, only the Recovery Plan for the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is being released for public comment. The critical habitat designation is under development and is scheduled to be proposed in the fall of 2003.

### **Who developed the draft recovery plan?**

The draft recovery plan for bull trout in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit was developed through the collaboration of biologists representing various Federal,

trout. Non-Federal entities,

State, and Provincial governments in the U.S. and Canada, working with Tribal representatives from the Blackfeet Nation.

### **Who would be affected by recovery efforts?**

A recovery plan is advisory only and carries no regulatory authority. It is the Fish and Wildlife Service's estimation of the actions necessary for the recovery of the species. Agencies, communities or individuals are encouraged to take voluntary actions described in the recovery plan to benefit bull trout.

Federal agencies are required to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service on actions they carry out, fund, or

including private landowners,

that may also be affected could include, for example, those seeking a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 404 permit under the Clean Water Act to build an in-water structure, those seeking Federal approval to discharge effluent into the aquatic environment, or those seeking Federal funding to implement private property improvements, where such actions affect the aquatic environment. In most cases where this link between activities on private lands and Federal funding, permitting, or authorization exists, consultation under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act is already occurring.

#### **How was the draft recovery plan for each unit developed?**

Recovery units were delineated based on the biology of the species and considerations for paralleling existing state conservation and fisheries management frameworks wherever possible. Recovery teams incorporated existing state conservation processes to the degree possible, depending on the degree to which they had been developed (for example, the Montana Bull Trout Restoration Plan).

Because the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit contains only Federal, Tribal, and private lands, the involvement of the State of Montana was not extensive in the development of this recovery unit chapter. Due to the international configuration of this drainage, close cooperation with Canadian authorities is crucial to bull trout recovery. Most of the spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout in the Saint Mary and

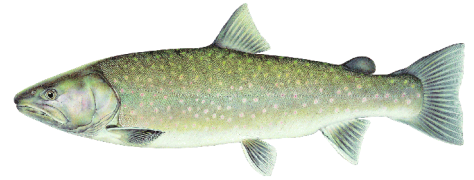
Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is in U.S. waters, but substantial portions of the foraging, migrating, and overwintering habitat is located downstream in the Canadian province of Alberta.

#### **What is the status of bull trout in the St. Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a final rule, listing bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) in the United States across their entire range as a threatened species on November 1, 1999 (64 FR 58910). Bull trout remain widely distributed throughout the Saint Mary and Belly River basins. They are found in most portions of U.S. drainage where they historically occurred, but were naturally excluded by waterfalls from many headwaters basins and lakes. The extent of bull trout range in downstream portions of the basin in much of Alberta has been diminished. Abundance of bull trout in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is believed to be reduced from historical levels, though limited documentation exists. Most local populations lack a sufficient history or intensity of monitoring to accurately determine a current population trend.

#### **What are the threats to bull trout in the St. Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit?**

Construction of major irrigation projects in the U.S. and Canada, dating as far back as 1902, disrupted much of the historical connectivity for migratory bull trout within the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers. Diversion dams, which seasonally interrupt the



main-stem migratory corridors, are the primary factors negatively impacting bull trout in both the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers. Secondary effects from the diversions are the direct loss of bull trout due to entrainment in the canals, as well as alterations to stream flow and water temperatures in downstream reaches. Much of the spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout in this recovery unit is in relatively remote locations in Glacier National Park or on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation where human impacts and development have been limited. Localized impacts to habitat occur in some the lower elevation watersheds due to forestry, livestock grazing, agriculture, mining, and transportation corridors. But these impacts are generally site-specific and less pervasive than the effects of irrigation diversions. A half-century of fish introductions, particularly the widespread stocking and establishment of brook trout, has negatively impacted bull trout in portions of several

drainages. Illegal harvest of bull trout has been well documented in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit, and in the past has been a major mortality factor due to a traditional focus on well known and limited spawning areas. Angler misidentification of species resulting in illegal harvest, and incidental take by anglers due to hooking mortality are continuing concerns.

### **What are the recovery goals and objectives?**

The goal for recovery of bull trout in this Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is to ensure the long-term persistence of self-sustaining, complex, interacting groups of bull trout distributed throughout the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit such that the species can be delisted. To achieve this goal a net increase in bull trout abundance in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit (as measured by standards the recovery team develops), with restored distribution of any populations identified by the recovery unit team as necessary for recovery. At this time, no extirpated populations have been

identified in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit.

### **What are the criteria for measuring recovery?**

Recovery will be measured according to four criteria: distribution, abundance, population trends and connectivity in the watershed. The recovery plan includes specific, quantifiable standards for each of these criteria.

**Distribution criteria** will be met when the total number of stable local populations of bull trout in United States waters of the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is nine or more, and local populations remain broadly distributed in each core area.

**Abundance criteria** will be met when each of the six core areas in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is documented to support at least one local population with an average of 100 or more adult bull trout annually (in United States tributaries). In the interconnected Saint Mary River core area the local populations must support an annual average of 500 or more adult bull trout.

**Trend criteria** will be met when

the overall bull trout population in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is accepted, under contemporary standards of the time, as stable or increasing; based on at least 10 years of monitoring data.

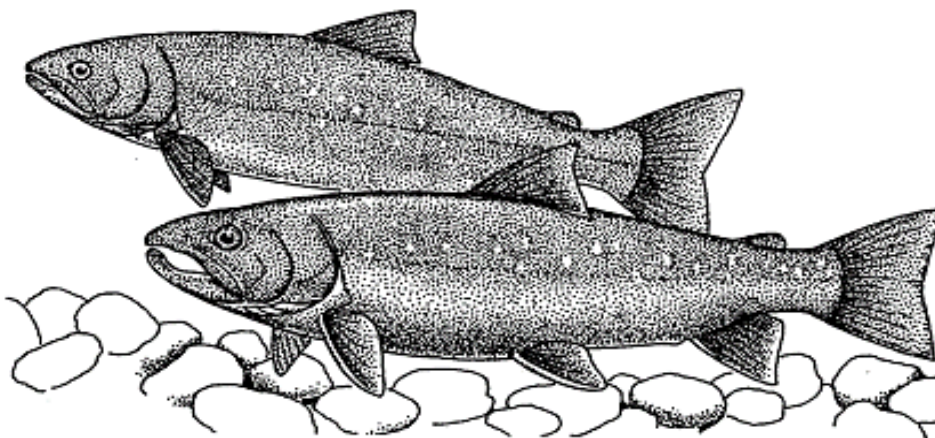
**Connectivity criteria** will be met when Shelburne Dam and Saint Mary Diversion operational and maintenance issues, including flow, fish passage, and entrainment concerns, are satisfactorily addressed.

### **What actions will be necessary to recover bull trout in the St. Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit?**

The primary recovery strategy in this recovery unit involves alleviating detrimental effects of the extensive diversion and canal systems operated on the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers in the U.S. and Canada.

Localized impacts to habitat due to forestry, livestock grazing, agriculture, mining, and transportation corridors must also be addressed and some fishery management concerns must be dealt with.

Over most of the last decade significant planning efforts to restore and recover bull trout have been initiated in Montana and Alberta Canada, and some on-the-ground activities have been implemented that were specifically designed to benefit bull trout and other native salmonids within the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit. Ultimately, the measure by which these efforts



should be judged is the degree to which they have produced positive response in the numbers and security of local bull trout populations. More details are available in the full text of the St. Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit chapter in the draft Bull Trout Recovery Plan.

### **How long will recovery take?**

The amount of time necessary to achieve recovery will vary among recovery units due to differences in bull trout status, threats affecting bull trout, implementation and effectiveness of recovery tasks, and responses to recovery tasks. In the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit the current status of bull trout is better than in some other portions of the range. However, a significant amount of work remains to be done to reconnect and restore impaired habitat. At a minimum, 3 to 5 bull trout generations (15 to 25 years) are expected to pass before recovery can occur and we are able to demonstrate that bull trout populations in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit meet standards necessary to contribute to delisting.

### **How much will recovery cost?**

Total estimated cost of bull trout recovery in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit is about \$27 million, spread over a 25-year recovery time frame, or about \$1.1 million per year.

### **How can I obtain copies of the documents?**

The documents, along with maps, fact sheets, photographs and other materials may be found on the Pacific Region's website at

[www.species.fws.gov/bulltrout](http://www.species.fws.gov/bulltrout).

### **How can I comment?**

The Service will be accepting comments, beginning November 29, 2002, on its draft recovery plan for bull trout in the Columbia and Klamath river basins and in the St. Mary-Belly River Basin in Montana. Comments on the draft recovery plan will be accepted for 90 days, until February 27, 2003. Comments on the draft recovery plan may be mailed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Snake River Basin Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, ID 83709; faxed to 208-378-5262, or sent via e-mail to:

[fwlsrboccomment@fws.gov](mailto:fwlsrboccomment@fws.gov)

Beginning November 29, 2002, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will accept comments from the public on the agency's proposal to designate critical habitat for the Columbia River and Klamath River distinct population segments of bull trout. Comments will be accepted for 60 days, until January 28, 2003. Comments on the critical habitat proposal may be submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Regional Office, attn: John Young, Bull Trout Coordinator, 911 N.E. 11th Avenue, Portland Oregon 97232; faxed to 503.231.6243 or e-mailed to: [R1bulltroutCH@r1.fws.gov](mailto:R1bulltroutCH@r1.fws.gov)

Two public information meetings and formal hearings to take testimony are scheduled. The information meetings will be from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. The formal public hearing will be from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m as follows:

January 7, 2003 in Polson, MT;

KwaTaqNuk Resort; 303 U.S. Hwy 93.

January 9, 2003 in Spokane, WA; West Coast Grand Hotel; 303 West North River Drive.

Four additional public information meetings and open houses are scheduled. Written comments may be submitted at any of these:

January 8, 2003 in Missoula MT; Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks office; 3201 Spurgin Road.

January 14, 2003 in Kalispell MT; Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks office; 490 N. Meridian Rd.

January 15, 2003 in Sandpoint ID; City Forum; 418 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave.

January 16, 2003 in Libby MT; Kootenai National Forest Headquarters, 1101 Highway 2 West.

Public information will be disseminated in the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers Recovery Unit and public informational meetings may be scheduled as requested.

*This is only a brief summary.*

*Please see full draft recovery plan for complete details.*